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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR PRESIDENTIAL DELEGATION TO POLAND

11. (SBU) Mission Poland warmly welcomes your upcoming visit to Poland to commemorate the outbreak of World War II 70 years ago. Your trip comes at a key moment as Poland, Germany, Russia, and their neighbors work to put behind them controversial historical memories that have mired their relations for decades. The participation of leaders such as Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk and President Lech Kaczynski, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, and Ukrainian Prime Minister Yuliya Tymoshenko demonstrates a willingness to work through sometimes politically explosive historical issues that have frequently hindered cooperation on other fronts. Poland itself is a time-tested ally of America and has fought with our soldiers in World War II campaigns in Italy (Monte Cassino), Normandy (Falaise), and Operation Market Garden in the Netherlands. More recently, Polish soldiers joined the coalition in Iraq for five years and maintain the 7th largest troop contingent in Afghanistan. Poland has also supported our efforts to extend the zone of security and stability to the former Soviet space, and shares our faith in freedom and democracy. As the event in Gdansk demonstrates, PM Tusk shares President Obama's vision of exercising soft power and reaching out to rivals, despite political risks at home.

POLISH U.S.-RELATIONS STRONG, BUT IN A ROUGH PATCH

12. (SBU) The U.S. has a strong, productive relationship with Poland, but bilateral ties are not keeping pace with Poland's deepening relationships with its European Union partners. Poland's continued exclusion from the U.S. visa waiver program and uncertainty about the level of U.S. engagement in the bilateral strategic partnership have affected the U.S. image. Our late response (no official announcement as of the morning of Friday, August 28) in confirming U.S. participation in the September 1 commemoration ceremony in Gdansk reinforced concerns about U.S. commitment among the Poles, who count on the United States as Poland's key guarantor of security in the region and closely analyze every move we make. As they waited for word on the presidential delegation, the major Polish dailies and television stations over the past few weeks have criticized the United States for "ignoring Poland," despite Poland's significant contributions to advancing Washington's global interests. The Poles also cite the lack of high-level U.S. visitors, frequently pointing out that these officials have visited neighboring countries. Three Polish statesmen were among the signatories of the July letter of Central European leaders to President Obama, which warned that the region's stability and Atlanticism should not be taken for granted in the face of allegedly waning U.S. interest.

13. (SBU) The fate of Missile Defense remains first and foremost on the minds of Poland's government and public. In August 2008, Prime Minister Tusk agreed to locate U.S.

missile interceptors in Poland under the auspices of a Ballistic Missile Defense Agreement (BMDA). He did so largely to accommodate a direct request from the United States, Poland's longtime ally. Poles are now waiting patiently for our decision on the future of European Missile Defense. Polish media report almost daily that the U.S. will likely withdraw from its prior decisions. Most Poles are not wedded to Missile Defense, but they strongly wish to avoid any perception that the U.S. is giving up on the program in order to reset relations with Russia.

14. (SBU) You will hear that, regardless of the fate of MD, there is an expectation that we will move forward with the U.S. Patriot rotation. We have been reassuring on this point--the President has confirmed that the U.S. will implement the bilateral Declaration on Strategic Cooperation that calls for the Patriot rotation. The form that Patriot rotation will take continues to receive much attention. Earlier this year, headlines heralding the arrival of unarmed "Naked Patriots" reflected fears that the rotation of a Patriot battery from Germany may not meet their expectations of a combat-ready, fully operational system capable of integration with the Polish air defense system, at least in the initial rotation. The USG interagency continues to work these issues, and is expected to inform the Poles of our decisions shortly after your visit. The MD decision in particular is extremely sensitive, and current U.S. thinking is closely held.

RUSSIA IN THE EAST . . .

15. (SBU) For historical reasons, Russia casts a long shadow in Poland, but the Tusk government has tamped down the

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rhetoric directed against Russia, instead choosing to engage in a pragmatic bilateral dialogue. The government also has endeavored to keep thorny historical issues such as the massacre of Polish soldiers at Katyn from impeding progress in other areas like bilateral trade. While Polish officials repeatedly have declared they do not expect major breakthroughs in relations with Russia in the near future, their pragmatic policy has already paid dividends. A year ago, Warsaw won the lifting of the Russian embargo on Polish meat exports, and on September 1, Poland is expected to sign an agreement on navigation in the Vistula Bay, reopening commercial shipping between the Polish port of Elblag and the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad for the first time since the break-up of the Soviet Union. The GOP views Putin's participation in the Gdansk ceremony as an important step in Warsaw's own "reset" process with Russia. Despite these modest successes, the opposition Law and Justice (PiS) party has frequently criticized the Tusk government for failing rigorously to defend Poland's interests in the wake of a resurgent Russia, and for relegating Poland to a subordinate role in EU-Russia relations. At the commemoration, Prime Minister Tusk is expected to express tactfully the Polish view of the origins of World War II, countering suggestions in a recent Russian documentary that Poland collaborated with Germany in the 1930s. President Kaczynski will say something similar, likely in blunter terms.

16. (SBU) Warsaw's efforts to develop a pragmatic approach towards Moscow are balanced by its anxiety about Russia's role as a regional power, particularly after the August 2008 conflict in Georgia. Poles sometimes feel hostage to the whims of larger powers, and they monitor closely the revived U.S.-Russia dialogue. They do not object to improved U.S.-Russian relations, as long as key decisions are not made over Poland's head.

. . . AND GERMANY IN THE WEST

17. (SBU) The Tusk government has also pursued pragmatic

relations with Germany, resulting in a significantly warmer tone in the bilateral relationship. Today, there is less acrimony surrounding the proposed German-Russian Nordstream gas pipeline that would bypass Poland--a project that some Polish politicians previously likened to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. Merkel's appearance at the Gdansk commemoration can be attributed in part to her constructive interactions with Tusk, a stark contrast to her rocky relationship with Tusk's predecessor, Jaroslaw Kaczynski. However, issues such as the historical interpretation of the plight of German expellees from Poland and German media comments about the extent of Polish collaboration with the Nazis during the Holocaust continue to complicate the relationship.

18. (SBU) Poland and Germany are gradually increasing coordination on issues related to Poland's Eastern neighbors, particularly Ukraine. Germany supported the \$600 million Polish-Swedish Eastern Partnership initiative, which the EU launched in May in an effort to bring countries, such as Ukraine, Belarus, and Georgia, closer to European institutions. Polish FM Sikorski and German FM Steinmeier also traveled together to Ukraine in June to encourage the government to pursue reforms necessary for Euro-Atlantic integration.

PROPERTY RESTITUTION LEGISLATION STALLED

19. (SBU) Poland is one of the last countries in Central Europe that have not made legislative provisions for an expedited, administrative (rather than judicial) mechanism for resolving private property restitution claims, an issue closely tracked by the American Jewish community. Private property compensation to owners and heirs -- including Holocaust survivors -- remains politically unpopular in Poland, even though the great majority of those compensated would be Poles living in Poland. The Polish government recently claimed that Polish compensation legislation would risk bolstering pending legal claims by German nationals, even though the German government has called the claims invalid. Polish officials also argue that the economic crisis is complicating a multi-billion dollar payment program.

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